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SUBJECT: DAS KRAMER AND AMB STEWART DISCUSS BELARUS WITH EU

Classified By: USEU Political Minister Counselor Laurence Wohlers, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1.(C) EUR DAS David Kramer and U.S. Ambassador Karen Stewart (Minsk) met the Friends of Belarus informal contact group on March 14 in Brussels to coordinate policy responses to the forced recall of Ambassador Stewart from Minsk and the continued detention of high profile political prisoner Alexandr Kazulin. EU Friends agreed to renew current sanctions against the Lukashenko regime and undertook to consider how to signal its solidarity with the United States. However, cracks in EU resolve were evident as Germany, Lithuania, and the Council Secretariat clashed openly on tactics. EU and German officials argued for more patience on the Kazulin situation as well as greater EU engagement with the regime. France reiterated its concern that continued isolation from the West will drive Belarus further into the Russian sphere of influence, but along with the UK, asserted that sanctions remained the West's primary lever against the regime. Lithuania suggested convening another Friends meeting before April 7, the date scheduled for the Commission's Delegation opening in Minsk. END SUMMARY

2.(SBU) During a March 14 visit to Brussels, EUR Deputy Assistant Secretary David Kramer and U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart held intensive consultations with EU institutions and member states on Belarus. These included a Friends of Belarus meeting hosted by the Lithuanian Mission. Participation included representatives of the European Commission, Council Secretariat, and Permanent Missions of the UK, Sweden, Slovenia, Poland, Latvia, France, and Germany. Although the group issued no formal conclusions, the Lithuanian Chair concluded the following:

-- Friends had agreed on the need of some kind of signal of solidarity with the United States.

-- While there had been some disagreement on whether to impose a deadline for Kazulin's release, the Friends assessed that April 7 was a key date in the political calendar with respect to that issue, given the opening of a Commission Delegation office in Minsk scheduled on the same date as well as the renewal of EU sanctions against Minsk that same week.

-- While the Delegation's opening was deemed important by many, the timing presented a problem. Lithuania urged caution in considering positive action in the current climate.

-- Finally Lithuania proposed that the Friends meet nearer to April 7 to coordinate tactics.

A detailed report of the discussion follows.

U.S. Recounts Broken Promises and Bad Faith

3.(C) At the first Friends of Belarus meeting convened this year by the Lithuanian Permanent Mission to the EU, DAS Kramer and Ambassador Stewart provided a detailed briefing to European Friends on current U.S. sanctions, bilateral discussions with GOB on prisoners, and the increasing harassment of US Embassy Minsk, beginning with the forced recall of Ambassador Stewart. U.S. officials now assessed that Minsk's initial offer to release six of the highest profile political prisoners by mid-February was a gambit to forestall new U.S. economic and financial sanctions. The regime's initial refusal to release Alexandr Kazulin to attend his wife's funeral and its insistence upon his return to prison immediately thereafter had reinforced our view of the matter.

4.(C) Although the U.S. Treasury recent public clarification of the current sanctions against Belneftikim was not/not a new sanction, Belarusian authorities had regarded it as such. Now that the regime had broken its agreement to release Kazulin, the United States would resume preparations for intensified sanctions. At the same time, Kramer underscored that the U.S. had stressed at every turn to Minsk that engagement remained on the table if it made good on its original offer to release the six. Conditions on the ground were worsening, however. The United States was now faced with a concerted Belarusian plan to constrain, downsize and perhaps eventually force the closure of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk. The choice was simply release Kazulin and improve relations with the West, or keep him in jail at the expense of improved relations.

Lithuania Calls for EU Solidarity with U.S.

15. Responding to the U.S. presentation, Lithuanian

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Undersecretary for Political Affairs Zygimantas Pavilionis called upon EU Friends to consider having the EU demarche Minsk on the forced recall of U.S. Ambassador as well as to consider recalling their own ambassadors. He stressed the need for solidarity with the United States. Other delegations, including France, the UK, Sweden, Latvia, Slovenia, Poland, and Germany, agreed to consider an EU intervention with Minsk on harassment of American diplomats, but deflected any debate in the Friends venue. DAS Kramer thanked the group in advance for ensuring that the EU took up the matter with urgency.

EU Officials Want More Engagement

6.(C) Offering the EU institutional perspective on developments in Minsk, Helga Schmid, Policy Planning Director, Council Secretariat and Hilde Hardemann Unit Director for Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, DG RELEX Commission, highlighted the importance of supporting and strengthening civil society and the democratic opposition. Although clearly uncomfortable with regime tactics against the U.S. delegation and Belarusian political opposition, both Schmid and Hardemann averred that diplomatic engagement, including the opening of the new Commission Delegation in Minsk on April 7 was warranted. They readily conceded that U.S. and EU tactics were different but that our strategic goals were the same.

Is Belarus Assuaging Moscow?

7.(C) Schmid asserted that the Russians might be behind the continued imprisonment of Kazulin as well as the new harassment of the US Embassy. At the Munich Werkunde conference, Belarusian FM Martynov told her that Moscow had been furious with Minsk's decision to invite OSCE/ODIHR to do long-term monitoring of its September 2008 parliamentary elections. Belarus was now scrambling to make up for its error. In any case, Schmid said she was clear with Belarusian DFM Voronetsky during his visit to Brussels March 7 on the steps that had to be taken to improve relations with

the West. She also signaled to Voronetsky that the EU would not take new sanctions in the interim. Pavilionis interrupted Schmid to question her mandate to make such a statement on behalf of the EU. The two officials bantered back and forth for a moment revealing clear tensions between Germany, Council Secretariat (note: Schmid is German) and Lithuania on the conduct of EU diplomacy toward Minsk. Kramer, supported by the UK, pointed out that the situation in Minsk had already changed for the worse since the Schmid-Vorontsky meeting.

EU Sanctions Set for Renewal

8.(C) Renata Marmalaku, the Slovenian (Council Presidency) COEST chair, reported that current EU sanctions would be renewed without change on April 7. The EU would, however, accompany the action with a political statement signaling a willingness to review the sanctions if the situation were to improve (read: Kazulin's release). The Council was already considering what it might do in response to release of the six prisoners. The UK, Sweden, and France openly rejected a suggestion from Lithuania to remove Lukashenko from the EU visa ban list first. Furthermore, Sweden and UK reps stated that Lukashenko's should be the last name to be removed.

Germany: Softer Line and More Time

9.(C) German MFA rep Ernst Reichl argued that the EU should not discuss its policy in front of the U.S. at the Friends meeting. Lithuania had "overreacted and that its suggestions were counterproductive." He claimed that "Belarus is capitalizing on this" and "that we should make it clear to Belarus that we have different tactics but the same strategy." Germany did not want the release of the five (of the six) prisoners to be received negatively by the West. In the meantime, Germany would focus on what decision the EU should take if and when Kazulin were released, including level of contacts. Reichl further asserted that Kazulin could not be released because of a lack of national amnesty legislation: "Germany as a country of rule of law cannot tell Belarus to disregard its own legislation." This assertion was rejected out of hand by several others in the room, including the United States.

10.(C) In response to the Lithuanian proposal that the EU offer Minsk a deadline of April 7 for releasing Kazulin, the German rep retorted that such a deadline was "not EU policy" and instead suggested the Friends accept the prospect of Kazulin's release after Belarusian Parliamentary elections in September. Furthermore, Germany would support a forward-leaning Council statement in April. Reichl was open to the possibility that such a statement include language on the treatment of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk. Lithuania

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countered that that wording in the EU statement would be too little, too late; reiterated for third time the necessity of a demarche.

France, Sweden and UK Try to Bridge the Gap

11.(C) French and British diplomats registered deep concern about the mounting diplomatic crisis between Belarus and the United States. They took up the Lithuanian call for solidarity with the EU's "main partner" (UK) in Belarus, but demurred on specific steps, pending EU internal consultations. While stressing the importance of using sanctions as political leverage, they also saw the need to react positively to the release of the five other high profile political prisoners. Several delegations, including the French, Brits, and Poles doubted Lukashenko's sincerity about releasing Kazulin or opening to the West.

12.(C) Angus Lapsley UKREP Polmincouns noted that since the PSC had debated on Belarus on March 4, the situation had deteriorated and was no longer "business as usual." While

the UK concurred with EU officials that the new Commission delegation in Minsk should open as quickly as possible, the timing was now problematic. Lapsley challenged Europeans to consider the negative optic of EU increasing presence at the same time the United States was forced by the regime to reduce its own. If the situation continued to worsen, the EU should consider adding, not removing names from the visa ban list.

13.(C) The Swedish PSC Ambassador recalled that since the last Friends meeting in November 2007, the United States had, true to its word, increased sanctions slightly and that the EU, similarly, had held the line on its own sanctions, but had not taken further measures. He noted both good and bad developments in Belarus since that time, but on the whole, saw that the negative list had grown longer, including the regime's harassment of students. Sweden urged the Friends not to get stuck on any one incident, but to keep the focus on the longer term goals. Finally, the Latvian rep stressed that Lukashenko's paramount concern was regime survival, that he would "play the Moscow card" and that the EU should not go any further (with opening) than it had already done.

14.(U) This message has been cleared by DAS Kramer.
MURRAY

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